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Synopses of Important Articles.

THE OLD TESTAMENT QUESTION IN THE EARLY CHURCH. By JAMES ORR,
in *The Expositor* for May 1895. Pages 346-361.

It is always interesting to find a burning question of the present day, such as that of the higher criticism, anticipated in the early history of the church. The Old Testament problems which we are seeking to solve were discussed with intense earnestness in the times immediately following the apostolic age, when Ebionitism and Gnosticism claimed so large a place in the thought of the Christian church and compelled it to define itself in creeds and establish its authority by the decisions of councils. The problem was then mainly a theological rather than a literary or critical one, yet in some of its aspects it strongly resembled the modern treatment of the Old Testament. The aim of this article is to present such phases of the problem as appeared in that remarkable product of Essenian Ebionitism in the second century—the pseudo-Clementine writings; and in the multiform developments of Gnosticism.

Our knowledge of Essenian Ebionitism is derived chiefly from Epiphanius. It seems probable that on the destruction of Jerusalem the Essenes, who then disappear from history, in an attempt to amalgamate with Jewish Christianity went over to the Pharisaic section, retaining, however, many of their peculiar ideas and customs. Their concessions for the sake of getting a foothold in the Christian church were the substitution of baptism for circumcision and the acknowledgment of the Episcopacy and of the gentile mission, the credit for which last, however, it gives to its own apostle, Peter, while it maintains its Pharisaic hostility to Paul. The pseudo-Clementine writings, in which this movement found expression, existing in the two recensions, the *Recognitions* and the *Homilies*, presents some most interesting and curious theological ideas, chief of which is its Christology in which is found its basis for its treatment of the Old Testament. According to its conception, there is one true prophet who in different forms and under different names, as Adam, Moses, Christ, appears at intervals to restore the knowledge of the truth when lost. The True Prophet is omniscient, sinless, immortal, foreknows all things. Christianity thus loses its originality, since it is thus made to be but a republication of the one eternal law. From this it follows that in its treatment of the Old Testament it combats the Gnostic view by maintaining stoutly the identity of the God of the law with the God of the gospel; the creator of the universe and God of the Jews with the beneficent God of Christ.

But how then does it deal with the historical and moral difficulties of the Old Testament which Gnosticism had brought into such prominence and had sought to explain by making the God of the Old Testament and Creator of the universe to be another and inferior being, the demiurge, whose work partook of his own imperfections? And apart from this, if Adam, Noah, etc., were reincarnations of the one true and sinless and omniscient Prophet, how account for their shortcomings, that Adam transgressed in Eden, Noah was a drunkard, Abraham was a polygamist and Moses committed murder? And again, if, as Essenes, the writers were opposed to animal sacrifices, how did they account for the sacrificial laws in the Old Testament. These are distinct questions and each had its separate answers. In respect to sacrifices it was maintained in the *Recognitions* that the sacrificial laws were not a part of the original Mosaic system, but performed a supplementary service, especially in the law of the central sanctuary, in facilitating the transition from the grosser idolatry of the surrounding heathen peoples to a religion in which sacrifices should no longer be thought necessary. The repeated devastations of the temple were designed to teach the same thing, the transitory character of the sacrificial system. The *Homilies*, however, take stronger ground and, maintaining the absolute perfection of the True Prophet in all his manifestations, attribute the stories derogatory to the character of God or of the patriarchs and prophets and all laws of animal sacrifice to the infusion of the evil spirit of prophecy which through Eve, the embodiment of the *female* or false prophecy and mistress of this present world, entered into the canon and was permitted as a test of faith for the righteous. These defects are due in part also to textual errors resulting in the carelessness of uninspired scribes who first committed the revelations to writing long after they had been given to inspired men who committed them only to tradition. The sum of it all is that the Old Testament was tried on the ultimate standard of the teachings of Jesus Christ and found wanting.

The Clementines, however, represented but a comparatively small section of the Christianity of the time. The great heretical movement was Gnosticism, which in its numerous sects established flourishing schools, honeycombed Christianity in all directions, and by its alluring philosophic speculations drew into its circles the élite of those who sought to combine philosophical culture with Christianity. Its importance is attested by the fact that the works of many of the church fathers are wholly or in large part occupied in combating this heresy.

With Gnosticism as in the Clementines, the most important question in their speculations was the Old Testament question, and according to their attitude on this question must the many gnostic sects be classified. The most prominent feature in them all is their distinction between the demiurge—the creator of the universe and God of the Old Testament—and the Supreme God revealed in Christ. Holding this in common, they differed in varying degrees on the question whether the Old Testament was wholly bad or pos-

sessed a certain inferior value. All were agreed that the God of the Old Testament was an inferior Being, limited, passionate, vengeful. Gnosticism was an attempt to explain the universe with its defects and its contradictions, an attempt to find a philosophy of the universe, and as such, in its Basilides and Valentinus, was the prototype of the great modern movements in Germany, led by Hegel and Schelling. It is interesting to note that the two great and unsolved problems, that of the imperfections of external nature in creation and the imperfections of Revelation in the Old Testament, were by Gnosticism treated as one. Both were accounted for as the work of a Being limited in wisdom and power, if not also in benevolence, whose character varied in the different schools from that of a Being purely evil, as among the Cainites, to that of the *Archon* of Basilides, ignorant and imperfect indeed, yet unconsciously an instrument of the supreme power.

Among the gnostic teachers the one most dangerous to the Christian church, because least speculative in his views and most practical in his application of them, was the great Pontic heretic, Marcion. He differs from the other Gnostics in his keener appreciation of the grace and *newness* of the gospel, and with him the difference between the God of the gospel and that of the Old Testament is heightened by his conception of the former as pure love, incapable of the severity which characterizes the latter. His best service was in combating the excessive allegorizing of the Old Testament by which the church had been able to place it on a par with the gospel, and by insisting on taking each text literally as it stood, compelling a recognition of the defects in the Old Testament teachings.

The gain to the church from having forced upon its attention these Old Testament problems was seen in the stimulus given to theological and critical reflection resulting in the fixing of the canon and a juster conception of the Old Testament. This appears most satisfactorily in Tertullian, who, besides convicting Marcion of unfairness and contradictions in his use of the Old Testament and showing the untenability of his theories in the light of Christ's teachings on the Old Testament, was able to bring out a more satisfactory solution of its difficulties in his conception of the unity of the Old and the New, as different stages of one organic growth of revelation. Herein is the key and the only one by which the church can yet hope to unlock the riddles of this perplexing subject.

From the fact here presented that the same Old Testament problems on which we are laboring today were so seriously discussed in the first days of the church yet without satisfactory results to the critical, or as some would prefer, the *destructive* party, the conservative of today will naturally derive satisfaction in a confirmation of his belief that his own orthodox position as to the character and origin of the Old Testament is impregnable. A view of Scripture that has withstood such violent assaults for eighteen centuries is surely the one that is to stand for all time. The critic on the other hand will see in the persistence of the Old Testament question a confirmation of his view that something

is wrong in our conception of the Old Testament and will continue to be wrong until a satisfactory solution has been found for this problem that "will not down." For him, every failure to account satisfactorily for the moral and historical imperfections of the Old Testament is a step forward since it shows us what to avoid in the future and leaves us free to press on to the true solution. Everyone today will recognize with Professor Orr that Tertullian's conception of Scripture as an organic development, "first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear," is a vast improvement over the Clementine and Gnostic solutions. But if we are to understand by his teaching of the "stages of Revelation" something like Muhammad's idea that the revelation was handed down to man a little at a time as he was prepared to profit by it, that God withheld the manifestation of himself, to be made only at intervals and in limited quantities, some will hardly accept Professor Orr's closing sentence that "The key which he here puts into the hand of the church is the only one by which it can hope even yet to unlock the riddles of this perplexing subject." Perhaps we shall do better to get a hint from the Gnostic's taking the imperfections of the Old Testament and the imperfections of nature as constituting one problem, and treat as our one problem man's slow and partial discovery of spiritual law and his equally tardy apprehension of natural law. In other words we may the rather find the true solution of the Old Testament problem in the conception that the spiritual universe like the physical lies all about us to be seen by him who opens his eyes to it and studies it, and that the Old Testament is the record of man's most successful seeking after God rather than of God's occasional manifestation of himself, a seeking in which man is *impelled* by the Divine Spirit, so that there is a divine element in the record, but not miraculously *guided* by the spirit in his search, and hence often missing the true conception of God that was afterwards revealed in Jesus Christ. Such a solution will come nearer to satisfying the human mind in an age of scientific and comparative study of nature and of religion such as is now upon us.

D. A. W.